
*The Ecumenical Movement in 1920:
(4) Towards a Global Conference on
Life and Work*

Odair Pedroso Mateus

Lecturer in ecumenical theology at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey (2004-2021)

Director of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order (2015-2022)

Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (2020-2022)

I. When Adolf Keller meets Nathan Söderblom...

Hotel Beau-Séjour, Geneva, August 8, 1920. It's been too cold an August, with average temperatures around 17.3 Celsius. Tomorrow is the opening day of a very promising post-war international consultation. Its long title is "The Preliminary Meeting to Consider an Ecumenical Conference of the Church of Christ on Life and work". However, I can tell you that a Church of Scotland delegate, J.-A. MacClymont, will object to this awkward use of the word "ecumenical".

The Swiss theologian Adolf Keller, depicted by his future biographer Marianne Jehle-Wildberger as "ecumenist, world citizen, philanthropist", has just arrived from Zurich. He is happy to be back in Geneva, where from 1904 to 1909 he was the pastor of the Swiss German Congregation at the Calvin Auditoire, next to Saint Peter's Cathedral, and had as his assistant in 1909 a young pastor called Karl Barth.

Keller will not forget his first encounter, today, with one the leaders of the meeting, the Lutheran Archbishop Nathan Söderblom of Uppsala, Sweden. "We met for the first time beneath the shady chestnut trees of the Beau-Séjour Hotel", he will write 14 years from now in his picture book *Von Geist und Liebe*. Söderblom "was sitting

at a table... with a group from Sweden”. And Keller notes a bit surprised: “they were reading the New Testament – not the meeting programme – in preparation for the conference the following day”.

II. The pioneering role of the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches

The meeting that starts tomorrow has come true less than two years after the end of the world war. This was made possible by its four main driving forces. One is the Scandinavian churches; the other is the Swiss churches. From their vantage neutral point during the recent war, they have advanced plans and appeals for the churches’ engagement in the search for peace. The third source is the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, the chief organiser and co-sponsor of the meeting, together with the American Foundation Church Peace Union.

The fourth driving force is a movement that deserves to be remembered in the 21st century for its ecumenical pioneering role in opposing war, fostering international law, and giving birth to the Movement on Life and Work, which will support the Christian resistance to Nazism and Fascism and pioneer the creation of the World Council of Churches. I’m speaking of the World Alliance for International Friendship Through the Churches.

The World Alliance, as it is known, has roots in the growing interest of Christians and church leaders in strengthening international relations and international law for the sake of peace. Between 1908 and 1909, under the impulse of Quakers, Anglicans and Lutherans, churches in Germany and in Britain have visited each other through living letters or, if you prefer, pilgrim team visits. This led to the creation ten years ago of a movement with a name that, though very informative, I never learned by heart: “Associated Councils of Churches in the British and German Empires for Fostering Friendly Relations between the Two Peoples”.

It was in the context of a meeting of the British Associated Council, held in 1914 with the participation of representatives from the Swiss churches that the decision was taken to call an international conference on friendly relations among the nations. The meeting should gather people from Protestant Churches in Europe and the US in Constance, south of Germany, August 3 and 4, 1914.

However, by the end of July 1914 war suddenly became imminent and tangible: countries began to mobilise their troops; railway traffic was disrupted; borders were closed. Ironically, if not tragically, a peace conference was being trapped precisely by what it was trying to prevent: war.

Half of the expected 150 delegates from 13 countries made it to Constance. The conference was anticipated to August 2. Prayers for Europe were held. A cable appeal to peace was addressed to European and North American heads of governments. Delegates were urged to leave Constance before the sealing of German borders.

They left at the eleventh hour, but not without passing four resolutions: on the duty of the churches to promote friendly relations among nations; on the establishment of national committees for this; on the creation of an International Committee to coordinate the work of the national committees; and to appoint a committee to implement these decisions. The World Alliance for the Promotion of International Friendship through the Churches was born.

III. Churches under uncontrolled nationalisms do not listen to each other

Late in November 1914, Nathan Söderblom, then the newly elected Archbishop of Uppsala, launched in seven languages an appeal “For peace and Christian fellowship”:

The war is causing untold distress. Christ's Body, the Church, suffers and mourns. Mankind in its need cries out: O Lord, how

long? The tangle of underlying and active causes which have accumulated in the course of time, and the proximate events which have led to the breaking of peace, are left to history to unravel. God alone sees and judges the intents and thoughts of the heart. We, the servants of the Church, address to all those who have power or influence in the matter an earnest appeal seriously to keep peace before their eyes, in order that bloodshed soon may cease. We remind especially our Christian brethren of various nations that war cannot sunder the bond of internal union that Christ holds in us. Sure it is that every nation and every realm has its vocation in the divine plan of the world, and must, even in the face of heavy sacrifice, fulfill its duty, as far as the events indicate it and according to the dim conception of man. Our faith perceives what the eye cannot always see: the strife of nations must finally serve the dispensation of the Almighty, and all the faithful in Christ are one. Let us therefore call upon God that he may destroy hate and enmity, and in mercy ordain peace for us. His will be done!

Söderblom's chaplain in Uppsala, Nils Karlström, will write years later that the Archbishop's Appeal was prompted by "his anguish at the weakness of the Church and at the devastation caused by the war".

Divided at the regional and global levels, the churches were not listening to the Word of God in mutual belonging, mutual vulnerability and mutual accountability. Unable of visible catholicity, they were more easily exposed to uncontrolled nationalisms, what a Pan-Orthodox synod held in Constantinople in 1872 had called (the heresy of) ethnophyletism.

Unsurprisingly, the Appeal of 1914 went virtually unheard outside the so called "neutral" lands: Patriotism was so unrestrained even from pulpits, Jonas Jonson, one of the Archbishop's biographers will write, "that every

reminder that Christ united humankind across national borders fell on deaf ears”.

But from this time on, noted Charles Macfarland, Söderblom became “a personal symbol of what was to be undertaken”: the idea of a world conference of churches on issues of justice, peace, and the workers’ movement, three times announced and dropped during the war, begins to gain momentum, especially in 1918.

IV. Oud Wassenaar 1919: The idea of an international Christian Conference on Life and Work

Last year (I mean 1919), the International Committee of the World Alliance met at Oud Wassenaar, The Hague, in Holland, early in October. The agenda included issues of war guilt; the supranational character of Christian missions; the establishment of a League of Nations and the protection of religious minorities; as well as the proposal for an international Christian Conference of churches, submitted by Söderblom.

Despite all difficulties, the meeting took an important step forward in the reconciliation between church representatives from countries that had been at war. The proposal was approved of “an ecumenical conference of the Christian communions to consider urgent practical tasks before the Church at this time”. But the World Alliance decided that the holding of such a conference was “beyond its competence”, while supporting the idea and making its personnel available for its organisation.

As a result, the Movement on Life and Work for an ecumenical Christian conference and council was born to carry it out, now under the leadership of the Swede Söderblom, the Swiss Otto Herold, of the Swiss Protestant Federation, and Charles Macfarland, of what will be in the future the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Here they are, after two planning meetings held in Paris last November and in New York last March.

V. The morning session was rather tense...

August 10, 1920. Some 90 delegates from 15 countries are gathered. The morning was rather tense. Söderblom spoke about “The Idea, the Purpose and the Need of an Ecumenical Conference”. Frederick Lynch, of the US Federal Council, offered a motion in support of the archbishop’s proposal. Discussion followed, which took immediately the direction of the need for post-war reconciliation as a condition of future cooperation.

Pastor Frédéric Dumas read a declaration from the French Protestant Federation concerning the war. There remains among those who were at war yesterday, it reads, “a moral problem”. Germany and Austria have declared war by violating the truth of the Belgium neutrality. Their action was unjust (and here the French text uses the German *unrecht*), and in violation of The Hague conventions. With a few exceptions, notes the declaration, Protestants in Germany, Austria and Hungary have done nothing, nor have they said anything against the evil committed by their respective governments.

The afternoon session led to agreement on the terms of Lynch’s motion calling for the conference and the evening session was dedicated to the programme of the future conference. Three main themes were identified: Christian brotherhood and righteousness in international relations; the Christian conception of the system of law as a gift of God; Christian principles in social life and in the social and economic construction of society, including relation to labour movement. Discussions on home and foreign missions should happen in consultation with the leaders of the missionary conference held last June in Crans, near Geneva¹. Other topics added to the agenda of the future conference were:

¹ See Odair Pedroso Mateus, “The Ecumenical Movement in 1920: (3) A New Beginning for Ecumenical Missionary Cooperation”, www.oikoumene.org/news/1920-3-a-new-beginning-of-international-missionary-cooperation.

Christian education; freedom of conscience and the protection of religious minorities.

VI. Three visitors from the Orthodox Church...
And the move from a Protestant to an Ecumenical
Conference on Life and Work

August 11, 1920. What an exciting session! What happened this morning reminded me of a meeting held by the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in 1911 in Constantinople². I explain.

The session moderator, Bishop Harald Ostenfeld of Copenhagen, welcomed three “fraternal visitors” from the Orthodox Church. Rev. Herman Neander, from Sweden, delivered in Greek a “brief address” to the visitors. They are the Archimandrite Pappadopoulos, future Metropolitan of Athens; the Metropolitan of Nubia, future Patriarch of Alexandria; and Metropolitan Germanos of Seleucia, future Metropolitan of Thyateira.

Metropolitan Germanos addressed the conference on behalf of the fraternal visitors. Söderblom replied. The two met nine years ago during the WSCF conference in Constantinople, when the WSCF ceased to be a Pan-Protestant movement and opened itself to all Christian communions.

And here comes the excitement. Something similar happened this morning. Bishop James Cannon, of the Episcopal Church USA moved that “the Committee of arrangement be instructed to invite all Christian Communions to participate in the proposed Conference”. What has been primarily a Protestant movement is now breaking walls of separation and, like the student Christian movement in 1911, becoming... well... becoming “ecumenical” as Söderblom likes to say.

² See Odair Pedroso Mateus, «A beautiful letter from the Church of Constantinople»
www.oikoumene.org/news/1920-1-a-beautiful-letter-from-the-church-of-constantinople.

August 12, 1920. The Committee of Arrangements met this morning at the Athénée, a few metres away from the site where the Republic of Geneva inaugurated three years ago an international Reformation monument that marks the 400th anniversary of John Calvin's birth in 1509. I wonder whether Calvin would appreciate this Geneva-centric celebration of the modernising consequences of his legacy...

The issue of the name of the future conference was discussed. The American Arthur J. Brown noted, "Care should be taken to avoid embarrassments which would come out of employing the word 'ecumenical'". It was then voted that the title of the future conference should provisionally be "Universal Conference of the Church of Christ on Life and Work" and that "it is hoped that this Conference will become Ecumenical".

VII. Isn't this year of grace 1920 an *annus mirabilis*?

We must bring this meeting to a close for a simple reason that you may not know. This morning, here at the Geneva's Athénée, another meeting in preparation for an international "ecumenical" conference is just about to start. It is the preparatory meeting for a world conference on matters of Faith and Order. Fourteen participants in our Life and Work meeting will also attend the Faith and Order meeting, including Bishop Charles Brent and Robert Gardiner, two driving forces of the movement on Faith and Order.

There is something extraordinary, unprecedented happening among Christian churches throughout the world. Is not this year of grace 1920 an *annus mirabilis*?

